

NPEC Notes

Volume II • Issue I

Better Decisions through Better Data

August 2000

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Welcome!

Welcome to the current edition of *NPEC Notes*, the periodic newsletter of the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. We hope this publication, along with the electronic newsletter (*NPEC in Touch*), and the NPEC Web site (www.nces.ed.gov/npec) will keep you informed of recent activity within the Cooperative. *NPEC Notes* frequently includes a statement from the Chair, a calendar of upcoming meetings and events, and highlights of some of the many NPEC activities involving members. This issue includes a focus article on the new NPEC product, ANSWERS, and a look at the recent activity of two groups that are close to finishing their work.

Please feel free to address any questions or offer suggestions to Communication Coordinator Hans L'Orange at hlorange@sheeo.org or Project Director Nancy Borkow at Nancy_Borkow@ed.gov.

NPEC Provides Answers

One of the challenges facing data and policy analysts is finding the best tools to use among the broad range of resources available. The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative's (NPEC) Accessing Survey Resources Working Group was formed in 1999 to address that challenge for survey developers. The first priority for this group, chaired by Michael McGuire from Georgetown University, was the creation of a Web-based tool designed to describe and analyze information on frequently used postsecondary education surveys.

ANSWERS (Accessing National Surveys with Electronic Research Sources), developed by Dr. John Milam, Research Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, was created to provide this information. Survey developers and users now have a resource that identifies existing national surveys and related data elements. The ANSWERS project also provides an electronic compendium of well-established definitions of key terms used in core surveys such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the Common Data Set (CDS), and many others. Policy analysts and institutional researchers can use this product to gain a more complete understanding

of the national datasets and common surveys. Another goal of the project is to reduce data collection burden and improve comparability of data and data definitions across surveys.

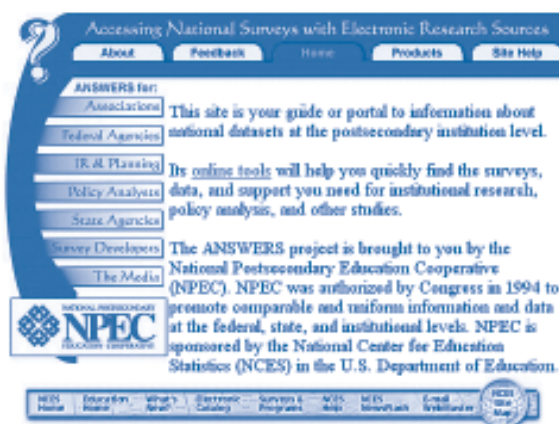
Dr. Milam started by collecting information from 17 core postsecondary survey developers. He asked them about the purpose of their survey and the availability of the resulting data. Milam also collected information on non-standard surveys for the purpose of identifying additional survey developers and the types of data that they are collecting and distributing.



Dr. John Milam

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ANSWERS Web Site





Comments from the Chair

By Cheryl Blanco, 2000 NPEC Chair

Approximately five years ago, what would become known as the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) began gaining momentum among a small planning group from around the nation. Authorized by Congress in 1994, NPEC was established by NCES "to identify and communicate on-going and emerging issues germane to postsecondary education, and to promote the quality, comparability, and utility of postsecondary data and information that support policy development, implementation, and evaluation."



Cheryl Blanco

As a grassroots organization, NPEC has a broad membership that is inclusive of all sectors (public, private, and proprietary) and levels (less than two-year, community colleges, comprehensive, and research institutions). NPEC members represent postsecondary providers, state and regional organizations, national postsecondary associations and other associations. Most importantly, the organization relies on this rich set of human resources to respond to its mandate.

As you read through this issue of *NPEC Notes*, I hope you will see the broad scope of NPEC's work. These issues are not selected at random; they

are the result of extensive conversations with NPEC members and our constituents. The input and feedback from constituents is particularly critical in helping us in our on-going self-assessment activities.

Although the Cooperative has been operational for less than five years, we believe it is timely and appropriate to take a good look at ourselves. As part of our strategic planning activities, we are reviewing what we have done and hope to do in the near future. We want to better understand what we are doing well and where we need to improve. With the help of an external evaluator, Dr. David Leslie from the College of William and Mary, we seek your comments on NPEC. If you're not familiar with us or our work, please visit our Web site at <http://nces.ed.gov/npec>. You can reach us through our project director, Nancy Borkow at Nancy_Borkow@ed.gov.

We are looking for new, more effective ways of reaching out to the higher education community, not only to share our work, but also to join in new partnerships to better address our common goals consistent with the NPEC mission. Please let us hear from you.

NPEC ANSWERS

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The next step was to review and analyze the data element dictionary created from all of the identified surveys. This process included creating content analysis categories, documenting data definitions, developing a matrix of the survey data elements, and linking the survey instruments, definitions, and related data. The result is a database-driven Web site that contains a matrix of surveys and data sources and can currently be accessed under the "Products" icon at <http://nces.ed.gov/npec/answers>.

The matrix is designed to present data from national datasets by domain and topical area. When users enter the matrix Web site, they are invited to choose a domain from the first column. They will then be prompted in a second column with a list of relevant topical areas; upon choosing a topical area, a list of datasets is displayed which address the topic and domain. Once a dataset is chosen, the associated variables appear in the fourth column. Details on each variable are then available by clicking on the variable name.

The next steps for the ANSWERS project are evaluation and promotion. Dr. Milam continues to incorporate feedback from the NPEC Working Group members and from presentations at numerous conferences and meetings including the SHEEO/NCES Network Conference and the AIR Annual Forum. There is a subgroup of the Working Group developing a promotion and dissemination plan in anticipation of a formal product unveiling in summer 2000.

ANSWERS has a lot to offer including a reduction in reporting burden by directing users to existing datasets whenever possible in place of initiating a new data collection. Promoting better and coordinated collection practices may lessen demands on institutions from survey vendors. The tool will also assist analysts who wish to locate and use existing data for quick, ad hoc analysis. It is hoped that the long-term impacts will include an establishment of best practices in survey development and promoting de facto standards in data collection questions, definitions, and rules.

For further information about ANSWERS, please contact Dr. John Milam

at jmilam@virginia.edu. The Web site may be visited at <http://nces.ed.gov/npec/answers>.

NPEC Notes Credits

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Working Group Spotlight

Each issue of NPEC Notes focuses on a current

NPEC Working Group and its activities. This time, there are two Working Groups highlighted: Data Ramifications of Technology and Competency-Based Initiatives. Both groups are included here because they are finishing up their work and both will soon have a final report detailing their activities and findings.

Data Ramifications of Technology

As computer and telecommunications-based technologies are utilized to deliver instruction, new measures that reflect changes in student participation, different sources and uses of revenues, new learning environments, and changing faculty roles will need to be incorporated into postsecondary education data systems. A Working Group, co-chaired by Sally Johnstone of WICHE and Dennis Jones of NCHEMS, was established to address the impact technology might have on these diverse issues.

The Working Group started by considering the scope, broadly defined, of the functions carried out by postsecondary providers and the kinds of information that would be relevant about postsecondary learners. The Working Group then analyzed the links between learners and providers.

The group also examined current surveys, both institutional-based and student-based to determine what modifications may be needed to capture any changes resulting from the adoption of technology. At one meeting, the Working Group, supplemented with individuals involved in the IPEDS Review process and the Student Transitions project, met to consider specific technology-related changes and additions to the NCES Adult Learner Survey and IPEDS. The recommendations of the Working Group were then forwarded to NCES. The Working Group also considered longer-range data needs related to technology and the mechanisms that might be used to collect new information.

At its most recent meeting on April 6 and 7, 2000 the Working Group considered the key long term policy questions

related to the adoption of technology-based delivery systems and the data that would be needed to address these issues. The group identified several policy areas that could be considered for further review including:

- *Expanding access;*
- *Effective use of technology investments;*
- *New provider configurations; and*
- *Allocation of resources across provider functions.*

The final report and recommendations of the Working Group are now being reviewed. The Working Group concluded that the most important area for future work is to further study the mix of providers' functions and resources that are utilized in different delivery contexts.

Data Ramifications of Competency-Based Initiatives

Interest is growing in the development of competency assessments and credentialing processes based upon performance standards. Current practices in developing and implementing performance standards and assessing learner competencies need to be reviewed to determine their utility in a variety of contexts.

Rick Voorhees, Associate Vice President of the Colorado Community College and Occupational Education System, was appointed the chair of a Working Group to investigate these emerging issues including their data ramifications. At the first meeting, members presented their experiences with a wide range of different competency-based projects.

The Working Group commissioned consultant Karen Paulson of NCHEMS to develop an annotated bibliography of existing studies and applications of learner competencies as well as design and test a protocol for carrying out case studies of competency-based initiatives.

The Group developed a framework for classifying competency-based initiatives within four areas: at entry into postsecondary education, at points of transition within postsecondary education, at exit from postsecondary education, and in the context of overall effectiveness. Case study sites within each of these areas were chosen. Karen Paulson completed her work on

the bibliography and assisted new consultant Beth Jones of West Virginia University in carrying out the first set of case studies.

The Working Group met on July 6 and 7, 2000 to review the findings of the case studies and review a draft of the group's final report. The report will include a series of general principles for defining and assessing competencies. Details on each of the eight case studies and the annotated bibliography will also be in the final report. The target audience for the report will be academic leaders, particularly those administrators and policy-makers at the state and institutional levels who are involved in implementing or planning competency initiatives.

Short Notes

NPEC Council Meeting Dates Set

The NPEC Council meeting dates have been finalized and the Program Planning Subcommittee, under the direction of Chair Renee Gernand, has been busy developing the agenda. The meeting will begin on the afternoon of Tuesday, November 28th, conclude on Thursday afternoon, November 30th, and will include a series of formal presentations, informal discussions, and updates on NPEC activities. Registration material will be mailed out later this summer.

1999 Council Proceedings

The Proceedings from the 1999 Council Meeting are now available through the Proceedings page of the NPEC Web site. See <http://nces.ed.gov/npec/proceedings.html> for more information.

Steering Committee Approves New Working Groups

The NPEC Steering Committee held its most recent meeting in May. In addition to reviewing the activity of existing projects, the members approved several new projects. Julie Noble and Dawn Terkla will be co-chairing a new group charged with extending the Student Outcomes Sourcebook by focusing on outcomes beyond writing, critical thinking, and problem solving. Norv Wellsfry is chairing a

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closely related Working Group that will look at Student Outcomes and Common Language. Another Working Group is looking at IPEDS Finance issues under the direction of chair Larry Goldstein. A planned forum on institutional operating measures will be chaired by Mark Putnam and Roberto Haro will be chairing an Access Working Group.

Michael McGuire Elected NPEC 2001 Chair

Mike McGuire, Director of the Office of Planning and Institutional Research at Georgetown University, was named chair-elect by the NPEC Steering Committee. Mike will assume the chair's duties at the January 2001 Steering Committee meeting. Mike's professional experiences include chairing the AIR data policy committee, and directing the research center for the Pennsylvania Independent Colleges and Universities.

Calendar of Events

September 13–14

**NPEC/NACUBO Cost
Policy Panel**

September 14

**Strategic Planning
Subcommittee**

September 15

Steering Committee

October 5–6

Accessing Survey Resources

November 28–30

NPEC Council Meeting

**Scheduling for other fall and winter meetings is
in the process of being finalized. Please check the
Web site for updates to the meeting calendar.**

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